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Gabon

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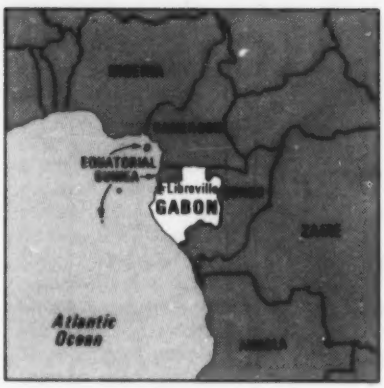

Official Name:
Gabonese Republic

PROFILE

People

Nationality: *Noun and adjective*—Gabonese (sing. and pl.). **Population** (1985): 988,000. **Annual growth rate:** 3.1%. **Ethnic groups:** Fang (largest), Myene, Bapounou, Eschira, Bandjabi, and Bateke/Obamba. **Religions:** Christian, Muslim, indigenous. **Languages:** French (official), Fang, Myene, Bateke, Bapounou/Eschira, Bandjabi. **Education:** *Years compulsory*—to age 16. *Attendance*—100% primary, 14% secondary/technical, 2% higher education. *Literacy*—65%. **Health:** *Infant mortality rate*—162/1,000. *Life expectancy*—50 yrs. **Work force** (120,000 salaried): *Agriculture*—65%. *Industry and commerce*—30%. *Services*—2.5%. *Government*—2.5%.

Geography

Area: 266,024 sq. km. (102,317 sq. mi.); about the size of Colorado. **Cities:** *Capital*—Libreville (pop. 200,000). *Other cities*—Port-Gentil, Franceville. **Terrain:** Narrow coastal plain; hilly, heavily forested interior; some savanna regions in east and south. **Climate:** Hot and humid all year with two rainy and two dry seasons.

Government

Type: Republic. **Independence:** August 17, 1960. **Constitution:** February 21, 1961 (rev. April 15, 1975). **Branches:** *Executive*—president (head of state). *Legislative*—unicameral National Assembly. *Judicial*—Supreme Court.

Administrative subdivisions: 9 provinces, 37 prefectures.

Political party: Parti Democratique Gabonais. **Suffrage:** Universal, direct.

Central government budget (1983 est.): $466 million.

Defense (1982): 7.2% of government budget.

National holidays: March 12, Renovation Day; August 17, Independence Day; major Islamic and Christian holidays.

Flag: From bottom to top, green, yellow, and blue horizontal bands.

Economy

GDP (1983 est.): $3.3 billion. **Annual growth rate** (1983): 0%. **Per capita income** (1983): $2,613. **Avg. inflation rate** (1981): 15%.

Natural resources: Oil, manganese, uranium, wood, iron ore.

Agriculture (3.8% of GDP): *Products*—cocoa, coffee, pineapples. *Cultivated land*—1%.

Industry (5.5% of GDP): *Types*—petroleum related, wood processing, food and beverage processing.

Trade (1983 est.): *Exports*—$2.0 billion: petroleum, wood, uranium, manganese. *Major markets*—France, US. *Imports*—$852 million: construction equipment, machinery, food, automobiles, manufactured goods. *Major suppliers*—France, US, Germany.

Official exchange rate (June 1985): 50 CFA francs = 1 French franc, fixed; 425 CFA francs = US$1.

Fiscal year: Calendar year.

Membership in International Organizations

UN and some of its specialized and related agencies including World Bank; Organization of African Unity (OAU); Central African Customs Union; EC association under Lome Convention; *Communaute Africain Financiere* (CFA); Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC); Non-Aligned Movement; Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

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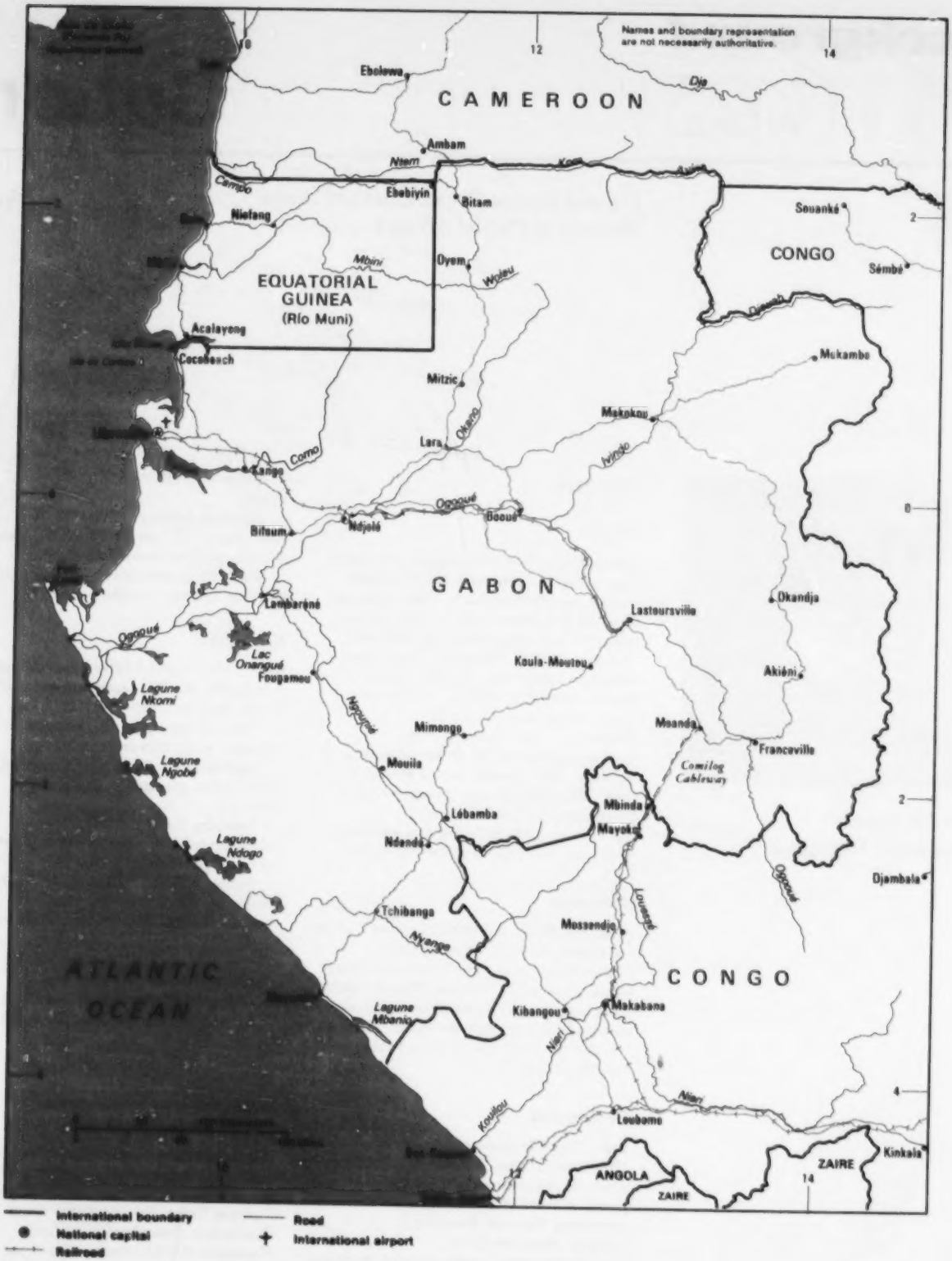
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Mitzic
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ANGOLA
ZAIRE
ZAIRE
International boundary
National capital
Railroad
Road
International airport

GEOGRAPHY AND PEOPLE

Gabon straddles the Equator along 880 kilometers (550 mi.) of the west coast of Africa. Most of the country is covered with dense, equatorial rain forest. The Ogooue River is navigable from Ndjole to the Atlantic, and its watershed covers almost the entire country. Port-Gentil, at the mouth of the Ogooue, is the center of the plywood and petroleum industries.

Little rain occurs from June to September, but the humidity is high. In December and January, there is occasional rain; during the remaining months, rainfall is heavy, averaging more than 254 centimeters (100 in.) annually at Libreville.

Gabon's population declined between 1900 and 1940, due to a combination of historical and environmental factors. The country is one of the less densely inhabited in Africa, and a labor shortage is a major obstacle to development. A Gabonese Government census in 1980-81 reported the population to be 1.2 million, a substantial increase over previous estimates.

Almost all Gabonese are of Bantu origin. There are at least 40 tribal groups with separate languages and cultures. The largest is the Fang, and others include the Myene, Bandjabi, Eshira, the Bapounou, the Bateke/Obamba, and the Okande. Tribal boundaries are less sharply drawn in Gabon than elsewhere in Africa. French, the official language, is a unifying force. More French people live in Gabon today than in colonial times.

HISTORY

The Gabonese are descendants of numerous Bantu ethnic groups that came to the area from several directions during the past 700 years to escape enemies or find new land. Isolated in the dense forests, the arriving peoples retained their own cultures. The most recent movement occurred in the early 19th century, when the Fang fought their way to the coast after hearing that European traders had arrived. Little is known of the tribal life in the period before European contact, but the force and beauty of much tribal art suggest a rich cultural heritage.

Gabon's first European visitors were Portuguese merchants who arrived in the 15th century and named the country after the Portuguese word *gabao*, a coat with sleeve and hood resembling the

An example of the traditional Gabonese folkart—a wood, brass, and copper Bakota figure.

shape of the Como River estuary. Dutch, British, and French traders came in the 16th century. France assumed the status of protector by signing treaties with Gabonese coastal chiefs in 1839 and 1841. In 1849, the French captured a slave ship and released the passengers at the mouth of the Como River. The slaves named their settlement Libreville—"free town." Various French explorers penetrated Gabon's dense jungles between 1862-87. The most famous one, Savorgnan de Brazza, used Gabonese bearers and guides in his searches for the headwaters of the Congo River.

France occupied Gabon in 1885 but did not administer it until 1903. In 1910, it became one of the four territories of French Equatorial Africa, a federation that survived until 1959. The territories became independent in 1960 as the Central African Republic, Chad, Congo (Brazzaville), and Gabon.

GOVERNMENT

Under the 1961 constitution, Gabon is a republic with a presidential form of government. The president is elected by universal suffrage for a 7-year term. The prime minister, the deputy prime ministers, and the Cabinet are all appointed by the president.

One hundred eleven deputies are elected to the 120-member unicameral National Assembly for a 5-year term, and 9 are appointed by the president. Judges of the independent Supreme Court are also appointed by the president.

For administrative purposes, Gabon is divided into 9 provinces, which are further divided into 36 prefectures and 8 separate subprefectures. The provincial governors, the prefects, and the subprefects are all appointed by the president.

Principal Government Officials

President of the Republic, Secretary General of the Gabonese Democratic Party—El Hadj Omar Bongo
Prime Minister, Head of Government—Leon Mebiame
First Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Public Relations, Transport, and Social Communication—Georges Rawiri
Second Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Mines and Petroleum—Etienne-Guy Mouvagha-Tchioba
Third Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Civil Service, Administrative Reform and Mixed Economy Enterprises—Emile Kassa-Mapsi

Other Ministers
State, Justice, and Keeper of the Seals—Gen. Georges Nkoma
State, Foreign Affairs, and Cooperation—Martin Bongo
Trade and Industry—Etienne Moussirou
National Defense, Veterans' Affairs, and Public Security—Julien Mpouho-Epigat
Minister-Counselor to the President for Civil and Commercial Aviation—Jean-Francois Ntoutoume-Emane
Economy and Finance—Jean-Pierre Lemboumba-Lepandou
Public Works, Equipment, and Construction, Commander of the National Police—Gen. Jean-Boniface Assele

Ambassador to the United States—Abdoulaye Mbingt-Mocktar
Ambassador to the United Nations—Jean-Felix Oyoue

Gabon maintains an embassy in the United States at 2034 - 20th Street, NW., Washington, D. C. 20009 (tel. 202-797-1000).

Further Information

These titles are provided as a general indication of material published on this country. The Department of State does not endorse unofficial publications.

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For information on economic trends, commercial development, production, trade regulations, and tariff rates, contact the International Trade Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce, Washington, D.C. 20230 or any Commerce Department district office.

POLITICAL CONDITIONS

At the time of Gabon's independence, there were two principal political parties: the *Bloc Democratique Gabonais* (BDG), led by Leon M'Ba, and the *Union Democratique et Sociale Gabonaise* (UDSG), led by J.H. Aubame. In the first post-independence election, held under a parliamentary system, neither party was able to win a majority. However, the BDG succeeded in obtaining the support of three of the four independent legislative deputies, and M'Ba was named prime minister.

It was soon decided that Gabon did not have enough trained people to support a two-party system, and the two party leaders agreed on a single list of candidates. In the February 1961 election, held under the new presidential system, Prime Minister M'Ba became president, and Aubame became foreign minister.

This one-party system appeared to work well until February 1963, when the larger BDG element forced the UDSG members to choose between a merger of the parties or resignation. The UDSG Cabinet ministers resigned, and President M'Ba called for new elections for a reduced number of National Assembly deputies (from 67 to 47), which were held on February 23, 1964.

The UDSG could not muster a list of candidates able to meet the requirements of the electoral decrees, and when it seemed that the elections would go to the BDG by default, the Gabonese military revolted and toppled the M'Ba government in a bloodless coup on February 18, 1964. French military forces intervened to reestablish M'Ba's government the following day. Elections were held on April 12 with many opposition participants. BDG-supported lists won 31 seats; opposition lists won 16.

Late in 1966, the constitution was revised to provide for automatic succession of the vice president should the president die in office. On March 19, 1967, Leon M'Ba and Omar Bongo (then Albert Bongo) were elected president and vice president. President M'Ba died on November 28, 1967, and Omar Bongo became president. President Bongo was reelected in December 1979 to a new 7-year term. In April 1975, the office of vice president was abolished and replaced by the office of prime minister. The prime minister, unlike the vice president, has no right to automatic succession.

In March 1968, President Bongo declared Gabon a one-party state by

American missionaries in Gabon built the Baraka Church in the mid- 19th century.

dissolving the BDG and establishing a new party, the Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG). He invited all Gabonese, regardless of their past political affiliations, to participate.

The goal of the PDG is to submerge the regional and tribal rivalries that have divided Gabonese politics in the past and to forge a single national movement in support of the government's development policies.

ECONOMY

Gabon is well endowed with natural resources, including petroleum, manganese, uranium, and wood. As a result of the income from exports of these products and the country's comparatively limited population, Gabon has the highest per capita GDP in black Africa. The economy also has benefited from a government policy supporting private enterprise and encouraging foreign investment.

At the end of 1982, Gabon completed an International Monetary Fund (IMF) program that was successful in stabilizing the economy and overcoming the debt service problems that had emerged in the late 1970s. Weak international markets for minerals and wood have slowed economic growth, but Gabon has been one of the few African countries to show a consistent balance-of-payments surplus in recent years.

The heart of the Gabonese economy is petroleum, which accounts for 83% of exports. In 1983, the country produced 7.8 million metric tons (MT), making it the second largest oil producer in sub-Saharan Africa. The level of production has declined gradually from a peak of 9 million MT in 1979 but is projected by most experts to stabilize near 1983 levels for the next few years. Gabon is also a substantial exporter of manganese and uranium. However, lower world prices in recent years have caused the percentage of Gabonese exports in these commodities to drop to 5% and 3½%, respectively, in 1983. Commercial wood exports have remained relatively stable (7% of exports in 1983).

Gabon also exports small amounts of coffee and cocoa. It is not self-sufficient in food production, however, and imports about 90% of its food.

The government is using its oil revenues chiefly to develop the country's transport infrastructure. The centerpiece of this program is the $2 billion TransGabon Railway, which will open the interior rain forests to the sea and provide greater access to the mineral regions in the southeast. In January 1983, the second stage of the railway was inaugurated, linking Libreville with the town of Booue, 322 kilometers (200 mi.) into the central interior. The third stage is planned to reach the mineral center of Franceville in 1986. Other planned projects include a minerals port at Owendo, near Libreville, and expansion of the road system.

Since many Gabonese are traditional or subsistence farmers, a major goal of the government's investment program is to encourage a shift to market-oriented

agriculture. This is being done through creation of a transport system to the interior as well as direct assistance to agricultural projects.

Although Gabon enjoys a high per capita income compared with that of most developing countries, it depends on external sources for investment capital and trained labor. Despite these constraints, with numerous natural resources, Gabon has great potential for continued growth. Gabon welcomes private foreign investors and has enacted an investment law providing substantial concessions and guarantees.

FOREIGN RELATIONS

Gabon has a policy of establishing diplomatic relations with any country wishing to enter into economic cooperation with it and which will adhere to the principle of noninterference in Gabon's internal affairs. Gabon has followed a nonaligned policy, advocating dialogue in international affairs and recognizing both parts of divided nations. Since 1973, the number of countries that have established diplomatic relations with Gabon has doubled.

In inter-African affairs, Gabon espouses development by evolution rather than by revolution and favors regulated free enterprise over doctrinaire socialism as the system most likely to promote rapid economic growth. Concerned about stability in central Africa and the potential for external intervention, Gabon has sought to mediate conflicts in areas such as Chad.

U.S.-GABONESE RELATIONS

Relations between the United States and Gabon are excellent. The United States buys a substantial percentage of Gabonese crude oil and manganese; in turn, it sells Gabon heavy construction equipment, aircraft, and machinery.

Travel Notes

Customs: Visas are required and must be obtained in advance from the Gabonese Embassy in Washington, DC. Cholera and yellow fever inoculations are required. Health requirements change; check latest information.

Climate and clothing: Libreville is hot and humid most of the year. Wear lightweight summer clothes. Bring sweaters for cool evenings during the dry season, June–August.

Health: Hospitals and private clinics are available throughout most of the country for most common problems. Major cities have doctors in private practice; several are US-trained. Residents and visitors are strongly advised to take regular preventative medication against malaria. Avoid raw fruits and vegetables and undercooked meats. Tapwater is not always potable.

Telecommunications: Local and long-distance telephone service is available 24 hours. Telegraph and telephone rates are about two-thirds higher than in the US. Libreville is six time zones ahead of eastern standard time.

Transportation: Limited bus transportation is available in Libreville and is erratic in some of the larger cities of the interior. Taxis are plentiful along the major routes. Rides may be shared at a substantial saving. Air Gabon and several charters operate one of the densest domestic air networks in Africa. Nearly all major population centers are linked by jet aircraft. An international airport at Libreville provides service to regional African points, particularly in Francophone Africa, and Air Gabon and several European carriers provide frequent wide-body flights weekly to Europe from Libreville.

The major U.S. assistance program in Gabon consists of a Peace Corps contingent of about 80 volunteers, primarily teaching English and working on rural school construction. Through a modest international military education and training program ($130,000 in FY 1985), the United States provides military training to a few members of the Gabonese Armed Forces each year.

U.S. private capital has been attracted to Gabon since before Gabon's independence. American investments exceed $200 million and are expanding rapidly.

DEFENSE

Gabon has a small, professional military organization, divided into army, navy, and air force. There is no conscription. The commander-in-chief of the armed forces is General of the Army Daniel Ba Oumar. Gabonese forces are oriented to the defense of the country and have not been trained for any offensive role outside its borders. Aside from the conventional military, there is a 1,400-man Presidential Guard, well-trained and well-equipped, whose mission is to protect the security of the president. The commandant of the Presidential Guard is Gen. Louis Martin.

Principal U.S. Officials

Ambassador—Larry C. Williamson
Deputy Chief of Mission—David H. Kaeuper
Public Affairs Officer (USIS)—Thomas G. Hart
Political Officer—Jeanne R. Vertefeuille
Economic/Commercial Officer—William J. McGlynn
Consular Officer—Elizabeth Beyene
Peace Corps Director—Buddy Shanks

The U. S. Embassy is located on the Blvd. de l'Independance, B.P. 4000, Libreville. ■

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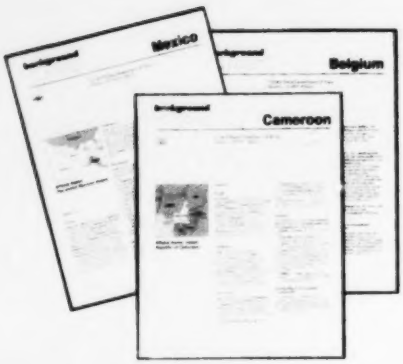

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